

MUSIC

Cracking a Glass Ceiling With the Maestro's Baton

By MICHAEL COOPER SEPT. 1, 2016

LUCERNE, Switzerland — There were practical tips on wielding the baton, on using the left hand to inspire the orchestra, on when to go for clarity and when to go for passion. Then the conductor Marin Alsop offered a word of warning after one of the women she was coaching at a master class here made a delicate flourish while leading the orchestra.

“It’s a little girlie,” said Ms. Alsop, 59, who became the first, and so far only, woman to lead a major American orchestra in 2007, when she began her tenure as the music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. “All these gestures we make — if a man did that, he’s sensitive, but if we do that, we’re girlie. You have to be aware of every move that you make, because it sends a signal.”

Her observation — which she made while here for this summer’s Lucerne Festival, which is showcasing female conductors — was a candid assessment of the environment women must navigate as they belatedly gain entree to a stubbornly male preserve: the maestro’s podium.

Women are more likely to be found these days leading the biggest industrialized democracies, or serving as four-star officers in the United States military, than working as the music directors of major orchestras. They head the governments of more than a quarter of the Group of Seven nations, now that Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain has joined Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany (and, if she is elected president in November, Hillary Clinton). Of the 37 four-star

officers currently serving in the United States military, three, or 8.1 percent, are women, according to the Pentagon. But Ms. Alsop is the only woman leading one of America's two dozen big-budget orchestras. That works out to a little over 4.1 percent.

But there are growing signs that the glass ceiling is finally beginning to crack.

The esteemed Finnish conductor **Susanna Malkki**, 47, will begin her tenure as chief conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra in September. She will also become the fourth woman to conduct at the Metropolitan Opera in December and take the title principal guest conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2017 — a position previously held only by Simon Rattle and Michael Tilson Thomas. The fast-rising Lithuanian conductor **Mirga Grazinyte-Tyla**, 30, began in August as music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in England, which served as a springboard for Mr. Rattle and another star conductor, Andris Nelsons.

Both were among the 11 women invited to conduct at the Lucerne Festival this summer. While the program's name, "PrimaDonna," and its logo — a hand with red-painted nails and a bracelet holding a baton — caused some eye-rolling, the concerts offered an all-too-rare chance to hear different women conduct a wide array of repertoire.

There were Beethoven and new Lithuanian music from Ms. Grazinyte-Tyla; Second Viennese School works and a new percussion concerto by Olga Neuwirth conducted by Ms. Malkki; Romantic and Brazilian music from Ms. Alsop and her other ensemble, the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra; and a truly unusual performance by **Barbara Hannigan**, the Canadian new-music soprano who increasingly conducts. She led the Mahler Chamber Orchestra in a program that included a Haydn symphony; a performance of Berg's "Lulu Suite" (which she also sang); and a suite of new modernist arrangements of music from Gershwin's "Girl Crazy," in which the orchestra joined in to sing on "Embraceable You."

All four women took time out during the festival to speak, individually, with The New York Times about music, their careers, and conducting while female. These are edited excerpts from their remarks.

MARIN ALSOP When I was 9, my father took me to a Young People's Concert with Leonard Bernstein conducting, and as soon as I saw him conduct, that's what I wanted to do. I was discouraged by my violin teacher, a woman, actually. I told her I wanted to be a conductor, and she told me, "You're too young, and girls don't do that." That was very discouraging. But my parents just said: "That's ridiculous. You can do whatever you want to do."

BARBARA HANNIGAN When I was a kid, I had never seen a woman conduct an orchestra. I didn't even know that was a career option. I thought women could conduct choirs. I had no idea they could conduct orchestras.

SUSANNA MALKKI About 20 years ago, when I started studying, people would respond if I told them what I was doing, they would go like, "Ooh," as if I had some kind of incurable disease.

MIRGA GRAZNYTE-TYLA I was participating in a competition for young choral conductors in Budapest, and after the prize ceremony the jury leader, a Hungarian lady, came to me and said, "Don't imitate men, male conductors." And this idea was very new for me. I had never planned to imitate.

MALKKI I don't want it to appear like it was some kind of heroic path in spite of all the difficulties, you know? We all meet people that we don't need. People who are not necessarily wishing you well. It's just important that you have enough of those who care, who encourage. It's also very much about what kind of ideals you have. What kind of artist do you want to be? Especially for conductors, it's very easy to impress people with incredible confidence and big gestures. And music is so much more, you know?

The sexism that female conductors still face from some male counterparts can shock, as when the Russian maestro Vasily Petrenko said, "A sweet girl on the podium can make one's thoughts drift toward something else." Some comments cut closer to the bone. Jorma Panula, an important figure in Finnish music who taught both Ms. Malkki and Ms. Hannigan, suggested in a 2014 television interview that women should stick to "feminine" repertoire such as Debussy.

HANNIGAN I called him the next morning. He just said that he hadn't seen until now a woman conduct the big, big rep — that he hadn't been convinced. If I get caught up in that stuff, it's just going to be tiring. And I don't even find it upsetting, because they're obviously wrong. I don't know why they say it, and I don't want to get inside their heads. I have my own stories to tell as a musician.

MALKKI I thought it was a pity. The positive thing we can see with that is that people were shocked. But if he would have said that 25 years ago, nobody would have been shocked.

Yuri Temirkanov, Ms. Alsop's predecessor in Baltimore, returned to guest conduct the orchestra last year and said of women to The Baltimore Sun: "I am not against them conducting. But I simply don't like it. There are women boxing and weight lifting; they can do that. But I don't like watching. It is only my taste."

ALSOP What can you say? I don't know what runs through people's heads. I think they're not really in the world that we're living in.

The gender imbalance has persisted despite decades of achievements on the podium by pioneering women. Antonia Brico conducted the Berlin Philharmonic in 1930 and became the first woman to conduct the New York Philharmonic, at Lewisohn Stadium, in the summer of 1938. Nadia Boulanger became the first woman to conduct a regular Philharmonic subscription concert at Carnegie Hall in 1962. Sarah Caldwell became the first woman to conduct at the Metropolitan Opera in 1976. During that time, women have made much greater strides as players, in part because of blind auditions: While it was rare to see women in orchestras just over half a century ago, they made up 47.4 percent of orchestra musicians in the 2013-14 season, according to the League of American Orchestras.

ALSOP If you happen to live in the right time, and all the stars align, it works. But it's thanks to many, many other people who worked hard.

MALKKI I think that this change has been late to happen because so many other things had to happen first in society, you know? If we just look on an orchestra level, if you don't have any female musicians in the orchestra, it would

not be natural to have a female conductor. And then you look at different things — the right to vote, for example, in Finland, was 1906, and in Switzerland was 1971.

Off the podium, Ms. Alsop founded the Taki Concordia Conducting Fellowship in 2002 to mentor young women at the start of their conducting careers and started the OrchKids program in Baltimore in 2008, which now provides music lessons, instruments and meals to more than 1,000 children in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods. At one OrchKids concert, she got a vivid reminder of how what is familiar to people sets their expectations.

ALSOP I went over to hear a little program they were doing. This little kid leaned over, and he said, “Hey, I think I’m going to be a conductor.” And the girl next to him said: “Boys can’t do that.”

A version of this article appears in print on September 4, 2016, on page AR7 of the New York edition with the headline: Using a Baton to Crack a Glass Ceiling.

© 2016 The New York Times Company